

Woman / Body / Landscape

Imaginary Geographies in the Writing of Karen Connelly

Karen Connelly's poetry and non-fiction belong not only to the genre of travel writing but also to a continuing project of female self-representation, a kind of "autobiographics," to use Leigh Gilmore's term. Like other contemporary theorists of women's self-writing, Gilmore extends notions of what constitutes autobiography, proposing "autobiographics" as an intermediary term between traditional autobiography and acts of self-representation in other genres.¹ While it would be reductive to read Connelly's books, particularly her poetry, exclusively in terms of self-representation, the narrative premise of each work involves a traveller or speaker who narrates stories of self and other set in landscapes around the world.² Specifically, travel for Connelly permits a de-centring of self. "Land owns and defines us," she writes in *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal* (1992): "Without it, we become something else" (1). In two of Connelly's most compelling works, *Touch the Dragon* and *This Brighter Prison: A Book of Journeys* (1993), travel serves as a form of self-fashioning. Both texts negotiate the relationship of self to place—and home—through narratives of travel. *Touch the Dragon* is a prose work that explores what the self becomes when refracted through the gaze of others in a different culture. *This Brighter Prison*, a collection of poems, narrates a darker psychological journey, in which the speaker struggles to define her vocation as poet and to deal with traumatic memories associated with home.

As a genre, travel writing falls between fiction and non-fiction, for it involves the movement of the traveller through actual spaces which are then

imaginatively reconstructed.³ As in autobiography, the retrospective shaping of experience is as crucial an object of study as the actual events the author recounts. Stephen Greenblatt argues, for instance, that in early modern travel narratives, the anecdote has a key role: “seized in passing from the swirl of experiences,” such stories “[mediate] between the undifferentiated succession of local moments and a larger strategy toward which they can only gesture” (3). The travel narrative may be seen as a series of embedded stories or even as a kind of photo album. In even the most unimaginative historical travel narrative, there is something to be learned from the way narrator frames the scene: that is, in the people, places, and objects singled out for attention. In other words, the narrative framing of the picture and the choice of subject matter tell us about the traveller and his/her construction of self and world.

Judith Adler suggests that the journey itself may be read as an artifact or performance, the basic elements of which are the body and its stylized movement through spaces in time (1369). In “Travel as Performed Art,” she argues that

travel may owe some of its cultural prestige, as well as its importance in persons’ lives, to the fact that, in carrying a performer beyond the world of routine home life, it yields observations, encounters, and episodes that are free to function as . . . abstract signifiers. (1369)

Adler focuses on actual tourists, but her observations can be extended to travel writing as well. Travel is, as Nicolas Howe claims, “a way of living and writing out one’s inner condition” (63). Michel de Certeau’s essays on spatial practice also provide a context for considering travel as performance. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he argues that spaces have a lived reality for people, which may be “underexpressed” in language: felt on the level of the body rather than articulated through speech. As he puts it: “[p]laces are fragmentary and inward-turning histories . . . symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. ‘I feel good here’—the well-being [suggested in these words] is a spatial practice” (108). De Certeau connects bodies to spaces and to narrative as well: stories, he argues, “permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces” (106). In *Touch the Dragon*, we see this process of “storying” the self,⁴ as Connelly learns to inhabit the unknown spaces of a new country and culture with a body she represents as suddenly alien. In *This Brighter Prison*, the interweaving of old and new stories of self and place allows the traveller a way of “coming back in” when she returns to Canada.

Touch the Dragon: "I am not what I was before I came here"

Touch the Dragon charts what happens to the self when the relationship between identity and place is disrupted. At the age of sixteen, "painfully bored with high school" and Calgary, Connelly was hungry "for living knowledge of the world." She sought a way "out" by somewhat prosaic means: an exchange programme to Thailand (*Touch* i). In Thailand, she undergoes near-complete cultural immersion. She has some opportunities to speak English but lives with a Thai family in a remote northern location. Although the narrative involves only one year of Connelly's life, it can be seen as a *Bildungsroman*. Connelly states in the preface that her "true education began [in Thailand] and, in many ways, I consider it the country of my birth" (ii).⁵ Birth is represented metaphorically in the opening passage of *Touch the Dragon* in a sequence entitled "Leaving Canada," the first words of the narrative. Connelly represents herself taking flight, enclosed in the body of the plane, hurtling through space: "[a]s the country pulls out from under me, I overturn like a glass on a yanked table-cloth, I spill" (1).

The self that emerges in Thailand is one Connelly doesn't recognize, and which is marked for her by the unruliness of her body: "Everything is the wrong size here. My bones are too big, my mind is too small. I never thought words could fail me, but here they're not even words. They're useless noises, wholly unreliable" (23). Blood pours from her body as her menstrual period goes out of control, until a doctor with a few words of English tells her she has an infection and anaemia from her new diet. Even her name is altered, suggesting a new identity: Karen Connelly, mispronounced in Thai, becomes Kalen Canary. As the only white *falang* or foreigner in her area of Thailand in 1986, Connelly experiences what it is like to be a member of a visible minority, albeit a privileged one who has chosen her displacement. In the eyes of the Thai, she becomes the exotic other: "I feel like a new acquisition in a famous zoo" (7). Like a child who must learn to walk and speak, she cannot control her body as she lumbers beside her Thai classmates in traditional dance class or attempts to form the sounds of a new language (43). Her vulnerability is wryly and repeatedly acknowledged with the hyperbole that characterizes Connelly's imaginative flights: "I would die in a week here, if lost; I would shrivel into a wrinkled skin and catch in thorns. Snakes would nest in my ribcage" (194). Connelly learns the relationship between place, language, and identity through the cutting away of her Canadian moorings. "Land," as she writes, "steadies people, holds them, even if they imagine they control it. . . . Without it, we become

something else" (*Touch the Dragon* 1). In *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates*, Frances Bartkowski uses the classic woman/vase or figure/ground visual puzzle to describe the ambiguities of identity and place and the importance of articulating their complex relationship: there is a moment when, "for fractions of a second, [we can] name both elements of the representation, realizing that our eyes will soon insist on simplifying and choosing one element in this ambiguous visual field" (xvi). Connelly in effect learns what Bartkowski calls the "prismatic effects" of identities: that culture marks the self but that place is potentially transformative (Bartkowski xvi). In *Touch the Dragon*, Connelly begins to fashion a hybrid identity. By the end of her sojourn, longing to become Thai, she realizes how impossible this desire is: she is now, instead, "an interesting deformity. I am not Asian and never will be. Even if I forget it sometimes, no one else does. I am the wrong colour. But I am not what I was before I came here, either" (125). Throughout her narrative, Connelly refers back to the dream-like place home becomes, unable to hold "figure" and "ground" together at the same time. She senses that she has changed as a result of her cross-cultural experiences, but precisely how she has changed she cannot state in any language: "If a word exists that describes this quality I don't know it. . . . If there were a word to explain what has happened to me here, it would be a 'heart' word, and it would be in Thai" (125).

Are the effects of displacement lasting or transitory? Ajahn Champa, the English teacher at Connelly's Thai school, associates identity with place when she first meets Connelly: "Things you think are so real become dreams when you go away from them. Thailand will be a dream for you one day, when you go away again. Everything changes so easily. I might have lived in London in another life" (10). The relationship between setting and self is something Connelly tries to fix as she reflects on her new world. Her impulse is to turn to visual means of recording and understanding place, but at times even images can fail:

[There] are . . . photographs I don't take, can't take, scenes without explanations because I have none. Images materialize once or every day and seem impossible to catch except with my own eyes. Even writing them is nothing, not nearly enough, not real. With words I never quite touch the bones. (41)

Knowledge is local; it involves being there, bearing witness. The longer Connelly remains in the skin of this new country and identity, the more difficult it becomes for her to imagine Canada. Significantly, the narrative defers the moment of return, closing on the eve of her departure as

Connelly lies dreaming of the Thai home she is about to leave. In the context of Connelly's development as an artist, this episode represents the mastery of vision or imagination. Just before she goes to bed, her friend Goong gives her an elaborate set of instructions on how to dream what she wants. "Dream this, dream this," she repeats before falling asleep, and in her vision, the children of Nareerat sing (206). She is able to control what she sees, and the narrative concludes with a vision of the Thai village framed in the traveller's mind.

This Brighter Prison: The Poetics of Location

The poems in *This Brighter Prison* are drawn from journeys through Spain (the series "Spanish Lessons") and France ("Paris is Not a Dream"); the collection ends with poems about the return home to Canada ("I Kneel to Kiss the Ice," "A Grand Place: A Greeting").⁶ As "snapshots" of encounters in other countries, the poems record the speaker's travels in a manner that corresponds to her inner life. The writer-traveller seems drawn to scenes of suffering or to figures who can overcome suffering through creativity. In a number of published interviews and essays, Connelly has commented on the difficult circumstances that led to her first leaving home:

Coming to the poems again recently [the autobiographical *The Small Words in My Body*] . . . they suddenly felt real again, taut with the pain of my growing up, with the confusion and sorrow I felt when my older sister killed herself, with images of violence and amputation that haunted my first serious relationship, with the sometimes hesitant, sometimes unabashed wonder I first experienced in rural Thailand when I went to live there, at seventeen, as an exchange student. (*Grace and Poison* 4)⁷

In "Evidence of God" (*The Disorder of Love*), Connelly attributes her own inner survival to the gift of writing, "singing demons / out of me, out of my body, away / into the wind / or onto paper // where they are / no longer demons // but gifts" (56–62). Travel is what activated this gift.

In *This Brighter Prison*, Connelly creates (to use geographer J. Douglas Porteous's terms) both "sense-scapes" and "bodyscapes": metaphorical maps in which space is represented through the language of touch, taste, and smell. In these poems, the speaker's responses to place are figured through the body and through the language of physical sensation. In "Spanish Lessons," for instance, Spain becomes a place of oceans and rain: "the violet sky [. . .] / reaches down to kiss your face, / and stars drop ivory petals of light in your eyes" (17–20). There are two poles to the landscapes of *This Brighter Prison*. For

example, in the imaginary geography of this work, the ocean consistently stands for a place in which self merges, even vanishes, in the natural world. In poems such as “Would You Trade Your Life to Live There?” the shedding of self in the water suggests the desire to expand consciousness or escape pain.⁸ However, the natural world just as frequently turns on the speaker, its seduction exposed as illusion. In “The Ugly Mermaid,” the siren “seduces only herself”:

sea-witch, ugliest mermaid [. . .]
you are cast out, clenched of heart,
you make a ragged voyage in the dark

and even the sea spits you out
like a rotten tooth. (22–27)

In “The Old Man Presents Himself,” Connelly contrasts domestic and natural spaces, inside and outside. The speaker cowers in a room while the rain beats down; she is overwhelmed by the outside world. Geography bites back even when Connelly returns to Canada: ice cuts the lips of the traveller as she kneels to kiss the Canadian soil in winter (“I Kneel to Kiss the Ice,” 61–62).

The speaker’s sense of alienation and loss is expressed not only in her ambivalent relationship to landscape but also in her human relationships. For Connelly, “countries live in people” (*Touch the Dragon* 166); culture is embodied in individuals and their stories. As a travel narrative, *This Brighter Prison* is structured as a series of encounters with others, ranging from Amaya, a heroin addict whom the speaker shelters, to an unnamed woman in “Teeth of Garlic” who reveals a story of childhood trauma. The identity of the writer-traveller in these poems is curiously empty; her body is a vessel for the stories she hears. In “Teeth of Garlic,” the speaker positions herself on the outside of the dark story told, as listener and scribe to a young woman who confesses she has been raped:

I do not tell her that I am hunting
for details [. . .]
That I believe bits of bone and gristle are magic.
That I believe the silt of hearts is flecked with gold.

The girl spills memory into me
and I open like an eager hand
to catch her words [. . .] (53–60)

The open hand and hollow self are recurring images for the traveller’s identity in *This Brighter Prison*. They serve as metaphors for a transfigured or altered subjectivity, a Keatsian “negative capability” wrought, for Connelly, by the displacement of self in alternate landscapes.

As “Teeth of Garlic” suggests, this emptying of self is a pre-condition for creativity, for finding and retelling stories. But the empty self can also be invaded. In “Paris is not a Dream,” the city and its past overwhelm the artist:

In the museums and churches,
 hands like blades pass through your body,
 lives waltz into your skeleton,
 fingers press your eyelids
 and the whisper of history is such
 that you cannot hear your own blood. (IV:1–6)

The vulnerability of the empty self here is also evident in her relationships with lovers, who either see her as consumable (though arguably she also consumes lovers), or do not see her at all: “You rise [from the bed]; he does not open his eyes” (III:13).⁹ Her alienation is further reflected in the speaker’s vision of the city: “the filthy sea of streets” (II:4); the “neon” bodies of prostitutes (III:30); the unforgiving surfaces of city structures which peel away the skin (I:5–6). The woman cannot connect to the men whose bodies she seeks or remembers (III:31–34); she longs to split open the anonymous “masks” of the travellers in the Metro, the hardness of which also defeats her (II:15–20). As she leaves her lover’s bed to roam the streets at night, the poet addresses herself in the second person:

You remember your other country,
 but it is so far from this place.
 The broken compass is wedged in your chest. (III:38–40)

Disoriented, the speaker wanders through the city. In its galleries and museums, what she encounters reinforces her sense of emptiness and alienation. The paintings seem to promise a multi-dimensional world more real than her own. In contrast to *Touch the Dragon*, in which the narrator longs to become part of the everyday Thai world that surrounds her, here she wants to enter imaginary spaces:

You want to strip your body of clothes, your mouth
 of tinsel words, you want to
 [. . .] plunge into the paintings,
 greet the cracked and open faces, [. . .]
 lives, stories, deaths, lives,
 more vibrant in paint than
 your own sweating fingers,
 faces, eyes, touching yours. (IV:39–49)

The paintings themselves become imaginary “meeting grounds” of self and other, spaces in which to encounter the dead. In “Paris is not a dream,” the speaker shifts her attention from the city to works of art. She ceases to be a traveller and becomes a different kind of observer—a consumer of art. This shift to the aesthetic, which occurs repeatedly in *This Brighter Prison*, suggests that art, like travel, can transfigure and remake the self.

In the prose-poem “Journal without dates: from Paris to Honfleur to Caen,” a similar sequence occurs. The speaker is first a traveller, and then a museum visitor. She hitchhikes from Paris to Caen, sleeping in fields and travelling some of the way by foot. The “loneliness of freedom,” as Connelly calls it (22), opens a space for stories. “My lies,” she writes, “become historical”:

I walk through strawberry fields inventing
elaborate tales of orphanages, seductions, deaths.
The land’s memory rises up through me [. . .] (28–31)

She refuses to let the fellow-tourist who picks her up probe “her pearl of hurt” through his questions, yet sees that “[t]he price of a ride with a stranger / is skin, or words” (75–76). They check in to a hotel; he forces himself on her in a painful sexual encounter, yet she decides to stay long enough in the morning for him to buy her breakfast (280–81). The sexual encounter, the “price” of which the speaker seems to anticipate, suggests a disregard for self. Both the long journey and the poem end with the speaker’s visit to a museum in Caen, where there is an exhibition of photographs of Holocaust survivors. The strange dislocation of the speaker finds its objective correlative in these representations of tortured bodies. She is transfixed by them, in contrast to the other visitors to the museum, who appear unmoved. The exception is a child described in the final lines of the poem, who seems to embody a primal, life-seeking impulse to flee darkness for light: “She wants that green field above us. / She wants to drink and fly / through the sun-hurled air” (321–23). The movement of the child contrasts with the speaker’s immobility; the child’s turning from darkness to light echoes the metaphor of the world as a “brighter prison.”

A striking number of poems in *This Brighter Prison* relate encounters with artist-figures who, like the child in “Journal without dates” are mirror-doubles of the speaker: they can negotiate the distance between art and life and create a space for healing. Like the gallery visits, these encounters with artists mark a shift to the aesthetic: instead of travel as a mode of self-discovery, the contemplation or creation of art serves this function. In the

case of the artists she meets, suffering, externalized through art, acquires monumentality. Jean-Louis, a painter, depicts the woman who has left him; the speaker in “A Painting for Rachel” commemorates a woman who has died. These people have travelled in time, from the moment of loss to a place where its representation becomes possible. As de Certeau comments in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “it is the silence of these things *put at a distance*, behind the windowpane, which . . . makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows the dreams of our secrets” (112; my italics). He continues: “This cutting off is necessary for the truth, outside of these things but not without them, of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories” (112). Distance, then, whether through travel or in time, permits the articulation of sorrow. Connelly suggests in several poems, however, that what the artist or traveller imagines is a fiction, an image to sustain memories of past connectedness. In “A Painting for Rachel,” she writes:

What I remember is imagined, this poem
is imagined, this is a history
I give myself, a rug of scraps
well-woven, yanked over the holes. (31–34)

Jean-Louis, the artist she meets, obsessively sketches his lost love: “You paint her again and again that way, / in a nightdress made of shadow, / her limbs and breasts blue in moonlight, / her entire face open as a mouth” (“Jean-Louis” 27–30). To Connelly and her unnamed companions in this poem, the paintings of Jean-Louis suggest “melodrama” and exaggeration (14):

Even as we laugh at you, Jean-Louis,
and shake our heads,
we inhale your paintings
as if they were perfume
drifting vivid from the skin of Venus.
We have no sacred loves.

(“Jean-Louis, eight years after the Italian girl went away,” 45–50)

But in her closing words, the speaker acknowledges the personal wellsprings of art and memory, and their consequent validity in spite of inevitable distortions: “When we say she cannot be as / beautiful as you remember / we know we are lying” (51–53).

“Isadora and the Basque Photographer” also focuses on the relationship between art and loss. In this poem, Iñaki, the photographer, has not yet lost what he loves; it is the speaker who sees beyond and can read the end of the story. The narrative premise of the poem is complex: it is the speaker who

urges the artist to “take the picture,” and who frames the female subject, the photographer’s lover, as an object of art (1–17). The photographer, in contrast, has been “too breathless” with awe or desire, to photograph his lover (26). Is the speaker “Isadora,” the woman who will leave Iñaki for other men, or is she simply a prescient witness, who sees “the rotting face of a black angel” behind the tableau she composes (58)?

The church is two hundred years old.
Her face will not last that long.
You will die.
Take the photograph.
You are dying now. (49–53)

These photographs, like the traveller’s snapshots, record what is meaningful, but they may also serve in darker times as reminders that moments of well-being are possible. Dean MacCannell suggests that the impulse to travel and to photograph resembles the religious impulse to enshrine experiences that have achieved heightened significance (*Tourist* 147). Although this kind of recording and remembering may be subject to mystification, I would argue that it serves a transformative function for the individual. The photograph or painting, the poem, the journey—they are all forms of visual, verbal, or performative self-discovery.

This re-orientation of self through art, as well as through travel, is the subject of “A Bowl of Yellow Flowers Stains the Canvas.” Arguably the best work in *This Brighter Prison*, it explores the shift to the aesthetic as a means of dealing with trauma. The speaker in this prose-poem is positioned as an observer, balancing precariously on a stone wall which splits the scene in two. What unfolds in the panorama before her is a painterly spectacle: people sunbathe by the ocean on a beach in Spain; lovers embrace; children play. It is “picturesque,” the speaker writes, because she cannot see the details (18). And it is a scene the observer deconstructs simply by turning her head, for the view she sees beyond the crowd includes a road on which, to her horror, a child is struck by a car. For a brief moment, the two worlds co-exist; the people on the beach are oblivious to what has happened. The speaker turns back and forth, “like someone at a stunning tennis match” (70–71): from a vision of beauty to one of overwhelming loss. The shocking intersection of these worlds spurs her reflection on the poetics of location:

This is where you are now. Then you turn your head away and you are somewhere else. The only truth is that there is none: it moves when we blink. The trick of seeing is not seeing everything. If you see everything and feel all you see, you unravel the wrinkles of your brain like a ball of kite string. . . . It is easier to be

blind if the choice is between blindness and madness. Learn to see with one eye or both eyes half-closed. (75–82)

Connelly here defends creative fictions as a means of dealing with suffering. Ironically, the distance that allows the speaker to see both worlds also protects her: from her vantage point, the girl's bleeding head looks like a bowl of spilled flowers on the road. The image underscores Connelly's deliberate choice to aestheticize a painful reality. The poem ends with the poet's turning toward art and the consolation of wider perspectives. "Here is your life," the speaker says: "This is the only canvas they'll sell you. Do not paint what there is (You'll be dust before you've done that work). Paint what you want to see" (95–98). The speaker's emotional state is "performed" through the movement of the body: she looks away towards the sea, the movement outwards paralleling an inner need to move beyond grief. At the same time, the gesture represents the artist's control of the story or vision, in a manner that echoes the concluding dream-vision of *Touch the Dragon*.

The final journey depicted in *This Brighter Prison* is the return home, the difficulty of which is suggested in the epigraphs to one of the poems in this section: "To leave is to die a little," but "[t]o return is a nightmare. I hate returning" ("She Returns to the Farm," 76). The speaker rejects an identity circumscribed by place, yet is driven by her need to confront the past:

I come home
 hating this language,
 these words, my stories,
 my eyes, hands, wishing
 only to forget the clamour
 inside that has brought me here
 again ("I Kneel to Kiss the Ice," 55–61)

Rather than the shift from aestheticized travel anecdotes to art itself—a shift so pronounced in the earlier sequences—here Connelly employs complex metaphors that link the speaker's body and memories with the landscape of home. The first poems on the traveller's return are set in a winter landscape: "Like the skin of a dead lover, / the snow feels nothing, / offers no signs" ("She Returns to the Farm," 25–27). The poems in this sequence—they have titles such as "Animals I Cannot Touch," "This Domain of Dark Wing," "Living Nowhere," and "Words Woven From the Sadness of Evening Trains"—suggest disconnection and continued separation, as if the speaker remains a traveller in her own country. To return is to take up the threads of past lives—"the habits of blood" ("I Kneel" 5), the "entrails of memory"

(“This Domain of Dark Wing,” 79)—in a landscape that is not restfully empty but cluttered with memories:

The up-ended roots of dead trees
are the time-slaughtered hands
of my grandmother [. . .]
There, higher up the slope
is my father's face [. . .]
the petrified bones
of those I failed to love. (“This Domain,” 60–69)

Home is indeed the “haunted place” de Certeau describes (108).

Such projections of memory on landscape function as a grotesque magnification of the inner world of the speaker. The lens is inverted, however, in the final section of *This Brighter Prison*, in which body is presented as landscape. Here, microcosm becomes macrocosm, and self, a new world. In the first poem of the sequence, “A Grand Place: A Greeting,” the speaker offers her body as a map to be read:

This, my skin.
A bruise here, a red scrape, there
a long blue vein, a river
on a breathing map. (6–9)

While mapping has connotations of conquering, Connelly plays on the idea of delighted discovery. Through the transformative touch of the lover, water runs in the desert, promising regeneration:

Your mouth wondered at my neck,
my thighs, the wet surprised songs
in this desert body,
And I smiled [. . .] (38–41)

To accept the body as territory with secrets, even dangers, is to accept the unpredictability of emotion itself. “Do not be afraid to cry here,” the lover whispers: “We are extraordinary when we feel” (36–37).

Movement and stasis, death and life are juxtaposed in the final poem, “Sleeping Near the Graveyard,” in which the speaker again contemplates the ephemeral nature of the body and memory. Even sleep is deceptive, for “[s]leep, where we imagine we are safe” may take the mind into a world of nightmare (II:1). In contrast to earlier poems in the collection, however, sex functions as a metaphor for merging through difference, and loss of self does not entail its erasure.¹⁰ The woman remains an observer as she contemplates her sleeping lover. The lover's body, however, becomes translucent to her; she sees a hidden world beneath the skin (I:29–34). The poem

concludes in an apotheosis of the senses, as if the speaker has indeed learned that “the body is its own absolute” (“Spanish Lessons” 9). Rather than attempting to hide her “pearl of hurt” (“Journal” 75), the woman seeks to enter her lover; their coupled bodies form the image of a mouth that speaks:

our bodies falling and opening
like the jaws of an angel
learning to sing. (“Sleeping Near the Graveyard,” 34–36)

This striking, even grotesque, image of the singing angel suggests the poet-speaker, who may indeed have found a voice by the end of her journey. The lovers, who together make the body speak, suggest a dialogical space in which solitudes can meet.

Conclusion: Perpetual Motion

As a traveller, Connelly seems motivated by the desire “to shed the weight / of human skin” or self, to escape the ways in which land, and arguably, memory, “own[] and define[] us” (“Would You Trade Your Life to Live There?” 21; *Touch the Dragon* 1). Yet whether one is at home or abroad, the lure of distance puts the traveller at risk of perpetual motion. In *Touch the Dragon*, Connelly writes:

I am often aware, as I was in Canada, that there is another life beyond the one I live now . . . and other ones beyond that. There is an endless variety of lives from which I’m cut off by the one I lead myself. I want to know those depths and swim out of the tunnel of my own days. At times I distrust my . . . vision: am I seeing through the layers, do I have a wide scope of things, do I know what illusions the mist and mountains contrive? (63)

Moments like these in Connelly’s work recall Bartkowski’s insights into the construction of identities in travel. Despite the darkness of many poems in *This Brighter Prison*, Connelly embraces an ideal of openness and movement. For this traveller, the world is “a *brighter prison*” (“This Brighter Prison” III:24). The golden horses of Versailles rise out of dirty water (“Paris is Not a Dream” (IV:63–65). “*La vida es una tormenta*”—these are the wry words of the Spanish woman who tells Connelly her story of trauma (“Teeth of Garlic,” 106). “Storm in Spanish,” Connelly notes, “is *tormenta*” (105). Life is torment; life is a storm. For Connelly, art is born from pain and from the grittiness of living; the physical alienation and displacement of the self through travel allow a space for healing and for art itself.

NOTES

I would particularly like to thank my colleague Zailig Pollock for his advice and encouragement, and Karen Connelly, who generously allowed me to interview her in 1999 about *This Brighter Prison*.

- 1 Sidonie Smith studies travel writing as a form of autobiography in *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*.
- 2 Connelly talks about the perils of poetry as autobiography in the Introduction to *Grace and Poison* (3).
- 3 Paul Fussell refers to the difficulty inherent in classifying travel writing as a genre, suggesting instead that travel narratives are generically hybrid (*Abroad* 202). Some of the most interesting work on relationships between space and performances of identity is being done in the field of geography, in studies such as Teather's *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage, Spaces Through the Body*, or Douglas Porteous's *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor*, in which Porteous coins the term "bodyscapes" to describe the psychological mapping of space through movement.
- 4 A term used by psychologist Harriet Lerner (Chapter 7, *The Dance of Deception*).
- 5 Also alluded to in the Introduction to *Grace and Poison* (7).
- 6 *One Room in a Castle: Letters from Spain, France, and Greece* (1995) is, as the title suggests, epistolary in form, chronicling time spent primarily in Greece. Connelly's poetry collections themselves are almost diary-like, in that they are structured as a sequence of thematically related poems. The poems snap into focus half way through *The Small Words in My Body*, when in the second part of the collection Connelly moves from an abstract series of confessional poems to works about Thailand. *This Brighter Prison* takes up the story of Connelly's travels where the last poem in *Small Words* ends, with her arrival in Spain.
- 7 See, for example, the interview published as "Death of the Tragic Female Writer," as well as the Introduction to *Grace and Poison* (2001), a re-publication of *The Small Words in My Body* and *The Disorder of Love* (4). In this introductory essay, Connelly writes about the relationship between poetry and personal experience.
- 8 See "Journal without dates," ll. 231–241.
- 9 See note 10.
- 10 This difference may be one based on the separateness of bodies, or it may refer to actual gender difference (the lover is not named as male or female). Connelly writes about lesbian as well as heterosexual encounters in *The Disorder of Love*; whether these encounters represent Connelly's own experiences or are imaginatively linked to the place in which she actually lived in Greece—the island of Lesbos—the issue of sexual ambiguity in her work remains to be explored.

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